



SIF National Evaluation Design: Summary of Recommendations

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Introduction

In 2009 the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act was signed. This Act reauthorized and expanded national service programs that are administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation, CNCS). The Corporation's mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. As the nation's largest grant maker for service and volunteering, the Corporation plays a critical role in building the capacity of America's nonprofit sector and expanding the reach and impact of volunteers in addressing pressing social problems. The Corporation's core programs are Senior Corps, AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America.

Included in the Serve America Act was the authorization to create the Social Innovation Fund (SIF). SIF is designed to target public and private dollars to focus on three of the six issue areas identified in the Serve America Act as critical for addressing social problems: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development and school support. SIF is expected to create a catalog of proven approaches that can be replicated across the country, with a positive impact on thousands of economically disadvantaged families. SIF was designed as a new way of doing business for the government by choosing intermediary organizations to administer grants to community nonprofits that in turn implement social service programs in the three issue areas.

SIF's approach is multifold: to support innovative and effective nonprofits as they grow; to generate new knowledge about how to address critical social challenges based on rigorous definitions of evidence; to promote public and private investment in portfolios of nonprofit community organizations to help them strengthen their evidence base and replicate and expand; and to build the grant making infrastructure and supportive environment necessary for social innovation to flourish in a diverse set of geographies.

The Serve America Act required that CNCS conduct an evaluation of SIF to determine whether it has met its intended goals, in particular its success at improving outcomes for those in need. At the request of CNCS, Abt Associates was charged with developing a set of design options that might be included in an evaluation of SIF. The discussion that follows is the result of an extensive outreach process to obtain input from stakeholders and experts as to what should be the key questions upon which the evaluation should focus. Input was obtained over several months from SIF grantees, a Technical Working Group (TWG), and additional experts. SIF grantees consulted included chief executive officers of the first round of intermediary grantees, their evaluation partners, and program directors. The nine TWG members are experts in the field of evaluation and social innovation and represent major foundations, academic institutions, and evaluation firms. In addition, experts in evaluation and social innovation from the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative were asked to share their thoughts about the evaluation. The Appendix provides a list of the TWG members and experts who provided input.

Based on the outreach process with stakeholders and experts, Abt Associates prepared this paper to provide recommendations on key research questions that the evaluation could address. This paper is intended to give the Corporation a foundation upon which to develop an evaluation study to be conducted by an outside contractor who would be competitively selected by CNCS. Abt Associates is precluded from bidding on this study and will have no involvement with the conduct of this evaluation.

This paper discusses three overarching questions that the evaluation might address:

- 1) Does SIF Produce?
- 2) Does SIF Teach?
- 3) Does SIF Influence?

Under each question, we briefly describe specific critical evaluation components. The discussion under each component describes a specific set of evaluation questions. Exhibit 1 presents the three overarching research questions, the components of each question, and the detailed questions for each component.

Exhibit 1: SIF Research Questions and Evaluation Components		
Broad Research Question	Evaluation Component	Detailed Research Questions
Does SIF Produce? (What does SIF produce?)	Documenting SIF's outcomes for people served	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do the community nonprofits (subgrantees) funded by SIF increase the number of people they serve and the units of service they provide? To what extent do programs funded by SIF reach new geographic areas or new types of people? Did the hosting of competitions at the grantee (intermediary) level contribute to this outcome and if so, how? How do people's lives change following the receipt of services funded by SIF? To what extent does SIF leverage (increase) other funding and diversify the funding base of community nonprofits? In short, did SIF funding catalyze additional investments in social innovations? What is the range of costs for providing services to economically disadvantaged communities in the three SIF issue areas?
	Strengthening the evidence base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the intermediaries rely on the levels of evidence described in the SIF NOFO as a guide for selecting community nonprofits? To what extent do the evaluations of SIF-funded programs, as implemented, expand the evidence base of the programs? What is the capacity of the intermediaries to monitor and assist the community nonprofits in the design and conduct of their evaluations? How does the overall SIF evaluation strategy and policy guidance compare to other public and private grant programs?
Does SIF Teach? (What can we learn from SIF about implementing social programs?)	Expanding the reach of programs that work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did program expansion compare with initial goals? How can program expansion strategies be categorized, and how did those strategies change over time? Do SIF programs produce outcomes that are similar to the original model? How does this vary by the various program expansion strategies? How do program expansion strategies and results differ across programs with different issue emphases?
	Using intermediaries to strengthen the capacity of nonprofits to implement and expand programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did SIF intermediaries define and measure capacity in their selection of community nonprofits? Is this different from the approaches taken by other funders? What assistance did intermediaries provide subgrantees to help them strengthen their capacity? Were they able to offer effective assistance to new federal grantees that enabled a transition to a strong public-private partnership? What capacity increases occurred for the subgrantees? What was the cost of the intermediary-provided assistance? How do the capacity-strengthening efforts of the SIF intermediaries compare to the efforts of other funders of nonprofits working in the same issue areas—for example, state or local government agencies, federal government agencies, and large philanthropic grant makers?
Does SIF Influence?	Influencing policy, funding and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How aware are leaders in the public, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors of the SIF approach to funding? What SIF activities were influential in shaping this awareness? Do these leaders believe that SIF has important implications for their own practices? Have these leaders changed their practices as result of SIF influence? Specifically, have they made changes that contribute to greater transparency, competition, and the use of evidence?

Research Question 1: Does SIF Produce?

A. Documenting SIF's Outcomes for People Served

In the summer of 2011, the Corporation for National and Community Service used the first round of SIF program funding to select 11 grantees. These grantees were nonprofits with track records of funding community nonprofit organizations working to improve the lives of economically disadvantaged communities in the three SIF issue areas. The SIF grantees, or intermediaries, subsequently held competitions among community nonprofit organizations in their targeted geographies and issue areas, and awarded SIF funds to 138 such organizations, known as SIF subgrantees. The competitions were held in the winter of 2011 and subgrantee awards were announced in the spring of 2011.

This component of the national evaluation of SIF will create the basic record of how SIF funds were used and what outcomes were achieved.

Documenting SIF's outcomes will describe the activities funded by SIF in each of the three issue areas—economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development and school support—noting the extent to which the activities expanded by using the increased funding of community nonprofits leveraged by SIF. The evaluation will document what the funded programs intended to accomplish and what they actually accomplished in terms of numbers of people served by various activities (outputs) and how the programs changed people's lives (outcomes). For example, an output might be the number of people receiving a particular type of training program, and an outcome might be the number of people who then got jobs or increased their earnings. To the extent possible, the evaluation will create common categories of activities, outputs, and outcomes across the subgrantee programs working in the same issue area and will provide summary information about all of the people served through SIF by a particular type of program.

The evaluation also will document the costs of the SIF programs—that is, how much it costs to provide a particular type of service to each person served.

This component of the evaluation will answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the community nonprofits (subgrantees) funded by SIF increase the number of people they serve and the units of service they provide?
2. To what extent do programs funded by SIF reach new geographic areas or new types of people? Did the hosting of competitions at the grantee (intermediary) level contribute to this outcome and if so, how?
3. How do people's lives change following the receipt of services funded by SIF?
4. To what extent does SIF leverage (increase) other funding and diversify the funding base of community nonprofits? In short, did SIF funding catalyze additional investments in social innovations?
5. What is the range of costs for providing services to economically disadvantaged communities in the SIF issue areas?

Answering these questions will start with a data reconnaissance phase to determine how the activities, outputs, and outcomes of SIF-funded community nonprofits can be grouped into common categories and what data are already being collected by intermediaries and subgrantees. Starting in 2012, the national evaluation will collect and analyze annual performance and cost data using standard data collection forms that are based on data in existing administrative data systems. This web-based data collection will be supplemented by telephone interviews to learn about the program model and other contextual information that cannot be captured quantitatively.

For the most part, it will not be possible for the national evaluation of SIF to report on the *impacts* of the subgrantee programs—that is, what would have happened to people in the absence of the SIF-funded programs. The required impact evaluations conducted by the subgrantees and their evaluation partners, described below, will answer that question. Many of the findings of the impact evaluations for the first round of SIF subgrantee programs will not be available within the timeframe of the national evaluation.

This component of the evaluation can be thought of as a foundation upon which other components will build. The basic information on program activities, outputs, and outcomes will be a key source of information for the two evaluation components described under “Does SIF Teach.”

B. Strengthening the Evidence Base

One of the main goals of the Social Innovation Fund is to produce evidence on the effectiveness of the social programs it funds. All SIF subgrantees are required to conduct evaluations of their programs in order to produce evidence about their impacts on people’s lives. Impacts are not the same as outcomes. For example, a person who receives a particular type of training funded by SIF might get a job and increase his income, but he might have done that anyway, even without the training. An impact evaluation compares people who receive the services of a SIF program to other, similar people, in order to measure whether the program had an impact. Impact evaluations make it possible to determine whether funding a program is worthwhile and also whether the details of how the program works (the program model) make it an effective program compared to other ways of doing the same thing.

Strengthening the evidence base of social programs is fundamental to the theory of action behind SIF, so the national evaluation should focus on measuring the extent to which SIF succeeded in strengthening the evidence base. In the 2010 and 2011 Notice of Funding Opportunities, SIF described three levels of evidence: strong, moderate, and preliminary. At a minimum, all subgrantees had to be able to demonstrate a preliminary level of evidence for their proposed program’s effectiveness at the time they applied for SIF funding. They also had to commit to conduct an evaluation that provides more rigorous evidence of effectiveness.

Prior to conducting the subgrantee evaluations, SIF intermediaries are required to complete three activities:

1. ***Develop a Portfolio Evaluation Strategy (PES):*** Intermediaries are required to submit their overall approach to conducting evaluations of their subgrantees. The PES provides a description of the intermediary’s timetable for the evaluations, the budget resources devoted to the evaluations, challenges and barriers to implementing the evaluation strategy, and any needs the grantee has for technical assistance in designing and conducting the evaluations.

2. ***Selection of Subgrantees:*** In the competitions that the intermediaries ran to select their subgrantees, the intermediaries are expected to use the three levels of evidence to determine the level of evidence the applicant’s practice, strategy, or proposed program possessed.
3. ***Subgrantee Evaluation Plans (SEPs):*** The SIF intermediaries are required to submit SEPs to CNCS for approval. These plans will be reviewed by the Corporation to determine if the plans include the requested components, can be implemented, and will move the programs to a higher level of certainty about the programs’ impacts—for example, by moving from preliminary to moderate evidence or from moderate to strong evidence.

This component of the national evaluation will examine the following research questions:

1. Did the grantees (intermediaries) rely on the levels of evidence described in the SIF NOFO as a guide for selecting subgrantees (community nonprofits)?
2. To what extent do the evaluations of SIF-funded programs, as implemented, expand the evidence base of the programs?
3. What is the capacity of the intermediaries to monitor and assist the community nonprofits in the design and conduct of their evaluations?
4. How does the overall SIF evaluation strategy and policy guidance compare to other public and private grant programs?

These questions will be answered through review of documents recording the process of selecting subgrantees and of evidence collected by the Corporation in the course of providing technical assistance on the planning and implementation of evaluations of SIF subgrantee programs. In addition, the evaluation will conduct two waves of interviews with intermediaries and their subgrantees to collect information on the technical assistance provided to evaluators to help them with the conduct of their evaluations.

Case studies may be conducted with a small number of intermediaries and subgrantees to provide an in-depth look at how the evaluation technical assistance helps to ensure that the evaluations are conducted successfully. Finally, the evaluation strategies and practices of SIF grantees will be compared to those of other social programs through a document review of grant application notices and interviews with a small number of directors of other programs.

Research Question 2: Does SIF Teach?

A. Expanding the Reach of Programs that Work

This component of the SIF national evaluation will study the process by which programs expand or grow—in particular, whether programs that grow stay the same or change. The evaluation will attempt to answer a very important question about the implementation of social program models that already have some evidence of effectiveness: how important is it to keep to the original program model, and how important is it to change the program model because the program is being implemented in a different place or for different types of people?

The national evaluation will attempt to sort the varying strategies for program expansion used by the SIF grantees and subgrantees into categories based on:

- How much the expanded program attempts to adhere to the original program model.
- How much the SIF subgrantee (or grantee) controls the way the expanded program works to make sure it adheres to the original program model—for example, through a legal relationship in which the expansion program is obligated to implement the original program.
- How much the subgrantee controls the way the expanded program works through less strict methods such as communication, program manuals, training, and the possibility of future funding.
- How much the subgrantee encourages the expanded program to adapt a program model to changed circumstances, using only broad guidelines for the way the program works.

The national evaluation will examine the following research questions:

1. How did program expansion compare with initial goals?
2. How can program expansion strategies be categorized, and how did those strategies change over time?
3. Do the SIF programs produce outcomes that are similar to the original model? How does this vary by the various program expansion strategies?
4. How do program expansion strategies and results differ across programs with different issue emphases?

This component of the evaluation will include intensive interviewing and review of program documents to create a typology of program expansion strategies, followed by data collection through telephone interviews and a small number of site visits. The documentation of actual program expansion will come from the component of the evaluation described above under Research Question 1A, “Documenting SIF’s Outcomes for People Served.”

B. Using Intermediaries to Strengthen the Capacity of Nonprofits to Implement and Expand Programs

Direct experience and the research literature indicate that many community nonprofits implementing social programs do not have the experience, expertise, infrastructure or capital to develop and use performance data, to engage in rigorous evaluations, or to grow successfully. Many are in fact preoccupied with year-to-year survival. Community nonprofits are funded in a variety of ways: by philanthropic organizations, directly by federal agencies, by federal agencies through state and local governments (such funding mechanisms often are called “block grants”), and—as in the case of SIF—through private, nonprofit intermediaries.

SIF has chosen to use sophisticated nonprofit intermediaries, experienced in grantmaking, to address capacity weaknesses in a select group of social programs: those with preliminary evidence of effectiveness in the issue areas of economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development and school support. An important issue for SIF—and for social programming in general—is how valuable the role of intermediaries turns out to be.

This component of the national evaluation of SIF will focus on the following questions:

1. How did SIF intermediaries define and measure capacity in their selection of community nonprofits? Is this different from the approaches taken by other funders?
2. What assistance did intermediaries provide subgrantees to help them strengthen their capacity? Were they able to offer effective assistance to *new* federal grantees that enabled a transition to a strong public-private partnership? Is this different from the approaches taken by other funders?
3. What capacity increases occurred for the subgrantees?
4. What was the cost of the intermediary-provided assistance?
5. How do the capacity-strengthening efforts of the SIF intermediaries compare to the efforts of other funders of nonprofits working in the same issue areas—for example, state or local government agencies, federal government agencies, and large philanthropic grant makers?

Data collection for this component of the evaluation will include intensive interviewing of grantee, subgrantee, and comparison organizations, as well as review of agreements between grantees and subgrantees. It may include case studies of the process of capacity-building at a small number of organizations.

Research Question 3: Does SIF Influence?

A. SIF's Influence on Policy, Funding and Practice

Although small in size, SIF also aims to influence the policies, funding and practices of public agencies (federal, state, and local), philanthropic organizations, and nonprofit organizations. In addition to the direct modeling of the SIF approach, other activities that contribute to SIF's influence strategy—undertaken both by the Corporation and by intermediaries—include the publication of notices of funding, technical assistance to actual and potential applicants, web sites, participation in major conferences, publications and, in the future, a publicly facing online learning community or knowledge network designed to share lessons and insights from SIF.

This component of the national evaluation of SIF will address the following questions:

1. How aware are leaders in the public, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors of the SIF approach to funding? What SIF activities were influential in shaping this awareness?
2. Do these leaders believe that SIF has important implications for their own funding practices?
3. Have these leaders changed their practices as result of SIF influence? Specifically, have they made changes that contribute to greater transparency, competition, and the use of evidence?

This would be a discrete study, based on telephone interviews and, possibly, focus groups, with senior staff at public, philanthropic, and nonprofit organizations.

Appendix: Technical Working Group Members and Other Experts Interviewed

Technical Working Group Members

Alan J. Abramson	Professor	George Mason University: Department of Public and International Affairs
Paul N. Bloom, Ph.D.	Adjunct Professor of Social Entrepreneurship and Marketing, Faculty Director, Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship	Duke University: The Fuqua School of Business
Elizabeth Boris	Center Director, Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy	The Urban Institute
Kathleen M. Brennan	Senior Associate	Innovation Network
Phil Buchanan	President	Center for Effective Philanthropy
Joanne G. Carman, Ph.D.	Assistant Professor	UNC Charlotte: Department of Political Science
Hallie Preskill, Ph.D.	Executive Director, Strategic Learning and Evaluation Center	FSG
Lisbeth (Lee) Schorr	Senior Fellow, Center for the Study of Social Policy, Lecturer in Social Medicine	Harvard University
Peter York	Senior Vice President and Director of Research	TCC Group

Other Experts Interviewed

Ellie Buteau	Vice President (Research)	Center for Effective Philanthropy
Laura Leviton	Special Advisor on Evaluation	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Lester W. Baxter	Director, Planning and Evaluation	PEW Charitable Trust
Ed Skloot	Director for Strategic Philanthropy & Civil Society	Duke School of Public Policy
Kathryn Newcomer	Professor of Public Policy and Administration	George Washington University
Julia Coffman	Director	Center for Evaluation Innovation
Robert Granger	President	WT Grant Foundation
Jodi Nelson	Director of Impact Planning and Improvement	Gates Foundation
Mike Bailin	Former WT Grant and Public/Private Ventures President	Consultant
Brad Presner	Metrics Manager	Acumen Fund
Nadya K. Shmavonian	President	Public/Private Ventures
David Bonbright	Founder & Chief Executive	Keystone Accountability
Michael Wiseman	Research Professor of Public Policy and Economics	George Washington University